Burnout, Drinking Motives, and Alcohol Consumption Among University Faculty and Staff

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Abstract

The health of faculty and staff is often overlooked despite their critical roles in teaching and supporting students. This study examined the relationship between burnout, drinking motives, and alcohol behaviors among 300 participants (112 faculty, 188 staff) through an online survey. Notably, staff reported higher personal burnout while faculty reported drinking more frequently. A structural equation model revealed that personal burnout indirectly influenced alcohol consumption and problems through coping motives. Drinking to cope was bivariately positively linked to all three types of burnout. As mental health concerns rise on college campuses, further research is needed to understand faculty and staff contexts, ensuring they are effectively supported in their roles impacting students' lives.

Keywords: Faculty; Staff; burnout; drinking motives; alcohol

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Introduction

Burnout, as defined by Maslach (1998; Multidimensional Theory of Burnout), is characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. It is often synonymous with workplace or occupational stress. Approximately 61% of employees report experiencing this type of stress (Bruce, 2019). University personnel (i.e., faculty and staff) while differing in responsibilities (Mullen et al., 2018), are predominately student-facing and people-centered, making them susceptible to burnout (Maslach & Jackson 1981; Padilla & Thompson, 2016; Urbina-Garcia, 2020). It can lead to negative outcomes such as illness, absenteeism, and problematic behaviors, including alcohol consumption (Blix et al., 1994; Chen et al., 2022). Therefore, the focus of the current study is to examine burnout among university personnel.

The rising alcohol consumption among middle aged adults (McKetta et al., 2021), linked to burnout (Boyle et al., 2025), highlights a need to examine university personnel's drinking habits and motives, which have largely been overlooked. Factors like emotional exhaustion and decreased personal accomplishment inherent in the collegiate environment contribute to burnout (Mullen et al., 2018) and may drive alcohol use (Makhdoom et al., 2019). Moreover, the link between burnout and alcohol problems may be weakened or influenced by other variables (Ryan et al., 2023). To extend the literature, this study aims to explore the association between burnout and alcohol behaviors among university faculty and staff.

Drinking motives often mediate the relationship between alcohol consumption and burnout (Temmen & Crockett, 2020). These motives are categorized into four distinct types: social (drinking to enhance group settings), enhancement (drinking to

increase positive feelings), coping (drinking to alleviate negative emotions), and conformity (Cooper, 1994).

Purpose of the Current Study

This study aimed to understand how perceived burnout relates to alcohol consumption, motives, and problems among university personnel (faculty and staff). We expected differences in alcohol consumption and burnout between faculty and staff, attributed to varying responsibilities and schedules (O'Meara et al., 2017).

RQ1: Is there a relationship between burnout and alcohol consumption, motives and problems among university personnel? It is hypothesized that the relationship between burnout and alcohol will be positive. As an exploratory extension, do these variables differ across faculty and staff?

RQ2: According to the literature (Temmen & Crocket, 2020), the four drinking motives are one mechanism by which burnout can influence alcohol consumption and problems. Therefore, does the level of burnout (IVs) indirectly influence drinking behaviors (DV) and problems (DV) through the drinking motives (mediating variables) of faculty and staff?

Methods

Procedure

In the spring of 2018, this study invited full time faculty and staff members (N=1503) working at the university's main campus to participate in a cross-sectional survey. Data was collected through a voluntary online survey (21.4% response rate; one reminder email sent). As an advertised incentive, $20 was offered to 15 randomly selected participants who completed the survey. We included only participants who had ever had alcohol in the analytical sample (n=300; 21 people excluded). The institutional review board of the authors approved the study's protocol.

Measures

Demographic Variables The survey gathered data on employment status (full-time or part-time), years at the university, age, sex (male, female, prefer not to answer), and highest education level (ranging from no schooling to advanced degrees).

Copenhagen Burnout Index (CBI; Kristensen et al., 2005). The CBI has 19 items (5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 "never" to 5 "always"). The original client subscale questions were adapted for this study to suit the university setting by replacing "clients" with "clients/students." The CBI was recoded (1=0; 2=25; 3=50; 4=75; 5=100); higher scores indicate a greater level of burnout. The scale is divided into three facets of burnout: personal burnout (M=40.16, SD=20.44, Cronbach's α=0.91), work-related burnout (M=36.77, SD=22.79, Cronbach's α=0.92), and client-related burnout (M=22.91, SD=19.08, Cronbach's α=0.87). The scales' reliability is consistent with previous research (Cronbach's α=0.85-.87; test-retest reliability, r=.51 to .59; predictive validity, job satisfaction and client-related burnout, r=.625, p<.001; Kristensen et al., 2005).

Drinking Motives Question - Revised (DMQ-R; Cooper, 1994). The DMQ-R quantifies the reasons why a participant consumed alcohol in the past year. The scale consists of 20 items (five-point Likert scale: "Almost Never/Never"=1 to "Almost Always/Always"=5). There are four subscales in the DMQ-R: Enhancement (α=.85, M=1.78, SD=.83); Coping (α=.86, M=1.40, SD=.67); Social (α=.89, M=2.10, SD=.94); and Conformity (α=.75, M=1.14, SD=.33) motives. The internal consistency levels are consistent with a recent adult

sample (Cronbach's α=0.81-.90; 6-month test-retest reliability, r=.65-.74; predictive validity, alcohol consumption and harmful drinking, r=.19-.42; D'Aquino et al., 2023).

Drinking Quantity and Frequency The researchers assessed the participants' typical drinking patterns by asking them to report the number of drinks per occasion and the number of drinking days per week, following a definition of a standard drink,

Rutgers Alcohol Problem Index (RAPI; White & Labouvie, 1989). The RAPI is a 23-item measure used to assess drinking problems. The participants indicated on a five-point scale from "Never"=0 to "More than 10 times"=4 that each consequence has happened to them in the past year and higher scores suggest greater alcohol problems. The RAPI has an alpha of .95 (*M*=1.46, *SD*=4.81) in the current sample (Cronbach's α=0.92; predictive validity with alcohol use, r=.20-.57; White & Labouvie, 1989).

Analysis Plan

SPSS and Mplus were used for the analyses (alpha = .05). First, the data were examined to determine if any data were missing at random. Using a complete case analysis, the test indicated that the data was missing completely at random, Little's MCAR, $\chi^2(52)=58.807$, $p=.240$. For RQ1, we used a series of Pearson correlations to examine the relationship between alcohol consumption, motives, problems, and burnout among university personnel. As an exploratory analysis, a series of independent t-tests examined the variables of interest (DVs) across faculty and staff (IV). For RQ2, structural equation modeling examined the relationships between the level of burnout (IVs), drinking motives (mediators), and drinking behavior (DVs).

Results

A total of 300 faculty (37.3%, *n*=112) and staff (salaried, *n*=134, 45.7%; hourly, *n*=43, 14.3%, administrative, *n*=10, 3.3%) from a mid-sized Midwestern university participated. They are employed by the university an average of 9.32 (*SD*=8.80) years. They reported an average age of 43.34 (*SD*=11.84) years. Most participants (56.7%, *n*=167) identified as female (male, 42.3%, *n*=127). They reported drinking an average of 1.70 (*SD*=2.09) standard drinks on a drinking occasion and drinking 1.63 (*SD*=1.71) days per week. See supplemental Table 1 for more participant characteristics.

RQ1: Is there a relationship between burnout and alcohol consumption, motives and problems among university personnel (faculty and staff)?

To address the first research question, a series of correlations examined the bivariate relations between the constructs (see supplemental Table 2). Across the four types of drinking motives, drinking to cope (DMQR coping) was moderately related to the three types of burnout (r=.29-.40). Conformity drinking motives (DMQR Conformity) were weakly associated with two types of burnout (CBI Work Related; CBI Client Related; r=.15-.24). Social drinking motives (DMQR Social) were weakly related to client-related burnout (CBI Client Related; r=.14). Typical Drinks and Typical Days were not related to burnout. Drinking problems (RAPI) was weakly related to all three types of burnout (r=.14).

As an exploratory analysis, a series of t-tests were used to determine if faculty and staff differed on the DVs (Table 1). The faculty and staff differed with respect to personal burnout and the number of days per week that they drank.

Table 1.
Exploratory analysis of faculty and staff difference across study variables

	Faculty	Staff	t-test
CBI Personal	35.74 (19.65)	42.74 (20.37)	$t(293)=2.89$, $p=.004$
CBI Work Related	33.89 (22.63)	38.38 (22.26)	$t(293)=1.66$, $p=.097$
CBI Client Related	25.42 (18.53)	21.01 (19.27)	$t(293)=1.92$, $p=.055$
RAPI	1.13 (3.58)	1.67 (5.46)	$t(279)=.91$, $p=.362$
DMQR Coping	1.33 (.59)	1.46 (.71)	$t(293)=1.53$, $p=.127$
DMRQ Social	2.18 (.98)	2.06 (.91)	$t(293)=1.05$, $p=.296$
DMQR Enhancement	1.81 (.85)	1.77 (.82)	$t(293)=.42$, $p=.673$
DMQR Conformity	1.15 (.30)	1.13 (.34)	$t(293)=.72$, $p=.474$
Typical Drinks	1.75 (2.50)	1.66 (1.82)	$t(293)=.35$, $p=.725$
Typical Days	1.98 (1.97)	1.42 (1.48)	$t(293)=2.76$, $p=.006$

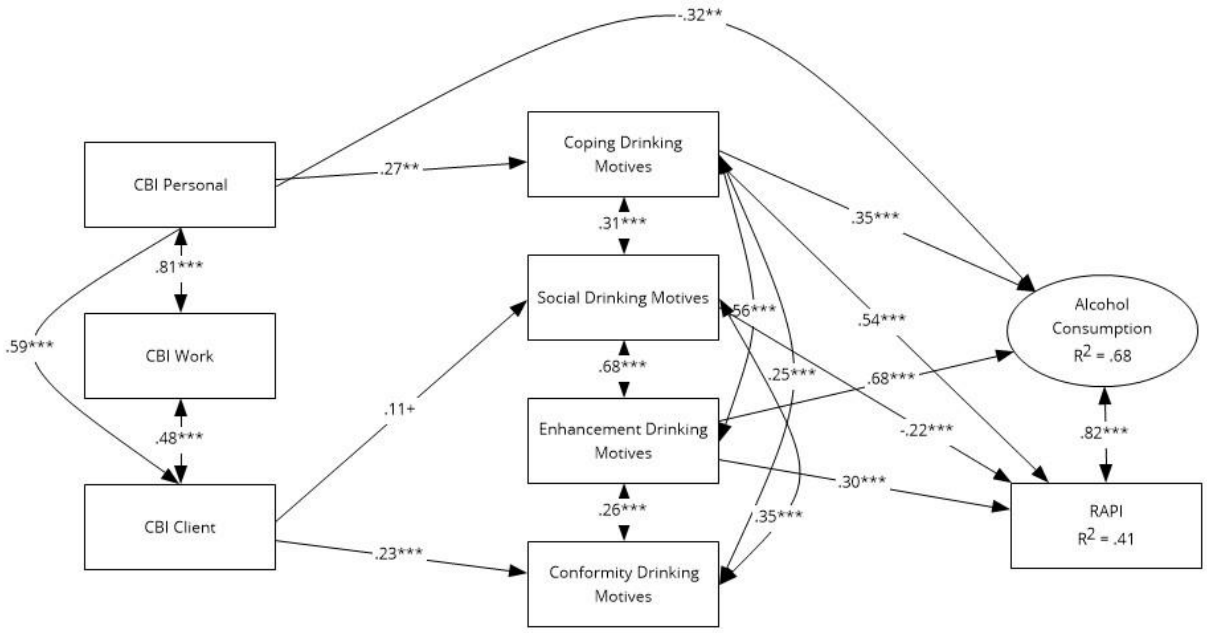
Note. CBI=Copenhagen Burnout Index; RAPI=Rutgers Alcohol Problem Index; DMQR=Drinking Motives Questionnaire Revised; Typical Drinks=the number of standard drinks consumed on a typical drinking occasion; Typical Days=the number of days in a week that the participant typically drinks at least 1 standard drink.

RQ2: Does the level of burnout (IVs) indirectly influence drinking behaviors (DV) and problems (DV) through the drinking motives (mediating variables) of faculty and staff?

To examine this relationship, we employed structural equation modeling. See Figure 1 for the model and parameter estimates. The model fit the data well, $\chi^2(n=300, 7)=16.818$, $p=.019$, RMSEA=.068 (CI90: .03-.11), CFI=.987, TLI=.924. Higher levels of personal-related burnout related to more drinking to cope (.27, $p<.001$). In addition, client-related burnout was related to conformity drinking motives (.23 $p<001$). Coping drinking motives (.35, $p<.001$) and enhancement drinking motives (.68, $p<.001$) linked to higher levels of alcohol consumption. Coping drinking motives (.54, $p<.001$), social drinking motives (-.22, $p<.001$), and enhancement drinking motives (.30, $p<.001$) linked to higher levels of alcohol problems.

For personal burnout to alcohol consumption (total effect, -.16, $p=.25$; direct effect, -.32, $p=.007$), the overall indirect effect was marginal (.16, $p=.054$), and the only significant motive pathway was through coping (.09, $p=.02$). For personal burnout to alcohol problems, the overall indirect path was significant (.16, $p=.009$; total effect, .099, $p=.302$; direct effect, -.062, $p=.423$) and the only significant motive path was coping drinking motives (.14, $p=.004$).

Figure 1.
Structural Model Examining the Relationship between Burnout and Alcohol Consumption and Problems through Drinking Motives



Note. Only significant paths displayed. **p<.01. ***p<.001. +p<.10. The alcohol consumption variable is a latent variable measured by typical number of drinks and number of drinking days in a week. Note. ***p < .001; ** p < .01; * p < .05; CBI=Copenhagen Burnout Index; RAPI=Rutgers Alcohol Problem Index; DMQR=Drinking Motives Questionnaire Revised.

Discussion

The current study provides initial evidence for key relationships between burnout and drinking motives, behaviors, and problems. The structural equation model indicated that there was a small indirect effect between personal burnout and drinking (consumption and problems) through drinking to cope. Given the cross-sectional nature of the results, this relationship needs to be interpreted cautiously. This relationship seems to provide initial evidence that the relationship between personal burnout and drinking (consumption and problems) partly flows through drinking to cope. A systematic review of burnout in faculty supports the current findings and highlights the negative impacts burnout has on health. However, it failed to address alcohol consumption directly and only evaluated academic staff that held faculty or faculty-adjacent roles.

Our exploratory research question found significant differences between faculty and staff. Faculty reported lower personal burnout and more drinking days than staff. These differences may stem from variation in job roles, like flexible faculty schedules vs. hourly staff positions, or education levels, as higher education is linked to more frequent but less risky drinking (Rosoff et al., 2021). Qualitative research could further illuminate faculty and staff experiences.

A surprising finding was the negative relationship between personal burnout and alcohol consumption in the model. The

negative path in the model would suggest that as personal burnout increases drinking decreases. The shift from non-significant bivariate correlations to a negative path in the model indicates that the relationship is more complex and might involve additional variables or interactions. Future research is needed to provide insight into the nuances of this relationship.

Findings might inform future interventions and research directions. All three types of burnout relate to problem drinking, but the bivariate relationships have a small effect size. In addition, the relationships became non-significant in the model. Therefore, there might be additional variables needed to further explain the relationship between burnout and problem drinking.

Implications for Health Behavior Research

There are several implications for health behavior research. Understanding the burnout-alcohol link among university personnel can guide targeted interventions. Similar to Temmen and Crocket (2022), drinking motives mediate burnout and alcohol use, necessitating longitudinal studies to explore this further. Differences in outcomes and demographics between faculty and staff highlight the need for context-specific research. Additionally, more focus is needed on non-teaching university personnel.

Limitations

This research offers initial insights into faculty and staff burnout and drinking motives, behaviors, and problems, but should be considered with some limitations. The study's cross-sectional, convenience sample limits its ability to test mediation; a longitudinal design would be more suitable. While the burnout scales were adapted for academia, further research should explore additional burnout aspects not captured here. The drinking motive measure use is common in alcohol studies but potentially misses nuances relevant to faculty and staff. A recent adult version (DMQ-A, D'Aquino et al., 2023) was not available during data collection. A larger sample could examine potential confounding variables like gender and racial/ethnic differences. The low response rate may have biased the sample, and the study's focus on a single Midwestern university limits generalizability. Results may differ at institutions of varying sizes or in different regions.

Conclusions

Faculty and staff provide the backbone of the academic environment and yet their burnout and alcohol consumption and problem levels are rarely studied. Their burnout levels relate to certain reasons to drink. Additional research is needed to examine the faculty and staff context so that we can better support them while they impact the lives of students at our universities and colleges.

Discussion Questions

College students are most motivated to drink due to social reasons. Which drinking motives (i.e., reasons why people drink) relate to burnout in faculty and staff?

Our findings indicate that faculty and staff differ with respect to the types of burnout. What aspects of the staff vs. faculty roles might contribute to these differences in burnout levels.

Conflict of Interest Statement: The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Author Contributions: CC and RMW designed the study and research questions. CC collected the data, drafted initial results, and wrote the first draft of the introduction. JN wrote sections of the introduction and

discussion. RMW and CC completed the methods, results, and discussion.

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Supplemental Table 1. Participant Characteristics

	Faculty (*n*=112)	**Staff** (*n*=188)
Full Time	100%	98.4%
Average number of years employed by the university	9.21 (*SD*=8.66)	9.47 (*SD*=8.99)
Average Age	45.20 (*SD*=11.08)	42.72 (*SD*=12.22)
Sex*	51.4% Male	37.6% Male
Highest Education Level*	95.4% Advanced degree	49.5% Advanced degree

Note. Participant characteristics with a * indicate that there were significant differences between faculty and staff.

Supplemental Table 2. Correlations between study variables

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
1. CBI Personal	–								
2. CBI Work Related	.77***	–							
3. CBI Client Related	.48***	.56***	–						
4. RAPI	.14*	.14*	.14*	–					
5. DMQR Coping	.40***	.36***	.29***	.60***	–				
6. DMQR Social	.11	.07	.14*	.14*	.34***	–			
7. DMQR Enhancement	.11	.09	.10	.44***	.55***	.70***	–		
8. DMQR Conformity	.09	.15*	.24*	.13*	.28***	.37***	.27***	–	
9. Typical Drinks	.01	.07	.08	.52***	.35***	.28***	.41***	.12*	–
10. Typical Days	-.03	.02	.03	.39***	.33***	.22***	.45***	.09	.32***

Note. ***$p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$; CBI=Copenhagen Burnout Index; RAPI=Rutgers Alcohol Problem Index; DMQR=Drinking Motives Questionnaire Revised; Typical Drinks=the number of standard drinks consumed on a typical drinking occasion; Typical Days=the number of days in a week that the participant typically drinks at least 1 standard drink.